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Annotation #1
Film Title: Sharkwater
Word Count: 1299

Title, director and release year?

Sharkwater is a documentary by Rob Stewart. First shown at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2006 and released in 2007.

What is the central argument or narrative of the film?

In Sharkwater, director and writer Rob Stewart seeks to break down traditional perspectives towards sharks by immersing himself and the viewer into their underwater world. He does this in order to bring urgency and importance to the main argument of the film-- the rapid expansion of shark hunting could easily bring sharks to extinction, a consequence that could undermine our earth's fragile ecosystem.

How is the argument or narrative made and sustained? How much scientific information is provided, for example? Does the film have emotional appeal?

In order for Stewart to bring attention to the problems he faced in Sharkwater, he uses two main tactics: contradicting current attitudes towards sharks and shedding light on likely consequences of current exploitation. Playing "devils advocate" isn't always easy, as Stewart recognizes when fighting for the shark population. In an attempt to share his adoration for sharks, Stewart brings the viewer into heavily shark populated areas of the ocean to show the real magnificence and importance of these creatures. Swimming alongside them, he shows that sharks aren't as blood-thirsty and vicious as most may think. In fact, only about five people a year die from shark bites. As stated in the film, more people are killed by elephants than sharks per year, which shows the presence of a deep seated psychological aversion towards sharks. By capturing the viewers emotions with beautiful underwater footage, Stewart carefully sets the stage for the harsh reality that he discovered on his adventure. Stewart takes unprecedented footage of shark exploitation in the Galapagos Islands and Costa Rica. In order to bring more importance to the issues he presents, he also outlines the catastrophic consequences that will result if the momentum of the finning industry is not stunted. Sharks are necessary predators in our ecosystem; without their presence, the fish population would rise, overtaking the population of plankton, which is imperative for controlling global warming.

What sustainability problems does the film draw out? (Political, Legal, Economic, Technological, Media and informational, Organizational, Educational, Behavioral, Cultural, Ecological?)

Sharkwater sheds light on the scary future that the shark population faces; though they have survived multiple mass extinctions, their population is threatened by a corrupt industry. Though the main sustainability problem presented in the film is ecological, it also explores a variety of issues that this ecological scare both resulted from and will create. Stewart seeks to break down the behavioral and cultural issue that humans have a poor judgement of sharks. This misconception, as Stewart shows, can be traced back to media and informational misdirection, such as that of the movie "Jaws," which portrayed sharks as blood-thirsty and dangerous.

However, as Stewart continues his journey and searches for a solution, he discovers the true complexity of the problem; the fight for sharks is also one that is politically corrupt and legally challenged. Stewart expands his understanding of the issue by boarding the “Sea Shepherd,” a ship in Costa Rica that uses water cannons to enforce Costa Rica’s laws against shark finning. Though it is technically protected by law in Costa Rica, they discovered the increasing demand for shark fins has created a rise in illegal trade, and in turn, a corrupt governmental consortium with Costa Rica and Asian buyers.

What parts of the film did you find most persuasive and compelling? Why?

When Stewart questions a claim that shark finning takes place largely on Taiwanese private docks that nobody knows about, he decides to go undercover and visit them for himself. This had me on the edge of my seat, as the filmmakers put themselves in danger to uncover as much as they could: “In all our time filming sharks, we’ve never been so scared,” said Stewart. Though these plants dried fins on their roof behind large concrete walls, the footage showed that these plants were still no less than obvious to outsiders; in fact, one had sharks painted on the gate. Authorities must have known about these, which shows just how corrupt the government is, all controlled by big business in Asia. This segment of the film was compelling to me because it exemplified the scary momentum that finning has acquired, and also that there is very little taking place to stop it. Another part of the film that helped put the issue into perspective was the end segments, which glimpsed into the future. As one researcher said “Future generations are going to look back on us and they’re going to think of us as barbarians. The same way that we think of slave traders.”

What parts of the film were you not compelled or convinced by? Why?

After watching this film, I followed up with research on certain areas that Stewart did not elaborate on. One part of the film that Stewart left out was the cultural significance of finning in Asia, which plays a huge role in the demand for the shark fins. Also, he fails to elaborate on the prodigious impact a disrupted ecosystem would have on humans. I also believe that one issue in the filmmaking of Sharkwater was that there was too much focus on Rob Stewart's personal journey and character. Though his adventure can make the film more interesting, it tends to distract the viewers from the overarching issue he wishes to convey. For example, Stewart's diagnosis with necrotizing fasciitis was talked about for a significant portion of the film, while that has nothing to do with the issue at hand.

What audiences does the film best address? Why?

This film seeks to raise international awareness of the issue that the shark population faces. It best addresses an audience that is interested in ecological and environmental issues. More specifically, it targets those interested in ocean ecology and sharks. Sharkwater gives a unique look into the shark finning industry, and offers valuable information to those researching or interested in this issue. Though the film suggests political action from anywhere, the film could inspire residents in locations such as Costa Rica, Asia, or states near the ocean to boycott shark fin products, which are more likely to be present in their area.

What could have been added to this film to enhance its environmental educational value?

Though this film was very compelling and raised awareness towards this issue, it provides little information on solutions and steps that you could take to help. In fact, the complexity uncovered about the issue makes it even more intimidating to approach as an outsider. Also, though the film had many statistics on sharks, its base in factual information and quantifiable statistics could have been better constructed.

What kinds of actions and points of intervention are suggested by the film? If the film itself does not suggest corrective action, describe actions that you can imagine being effective.

This film recommends that those interested in preserving the shark population should boycott shark finning by refusing to purchase any shark products. They also suggest writing to congress to further shark finning prevention laws.

What additional information has the film compelled you to seek out? (Provide at least two supporting references.)

Interested in the underlying motivation for shark fins in Asia, I researched the cultural significance of shark finning and shark fin soup. I came across an article in the New York Times called "Souring on Shark Fin Soup" by Bonnie Tsui, published in June, 2013. I gained a better understanding of shark fin soup and its importance in Asian culture; it is a dish that can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty. Once a meal only for the truly wealthy, it now is affordable to the middle class in Asia and is considered a "staple banquet dish." This information is significant because it creates an even bigger obstacle for finning prevention; Getting rid of a tradition that has been present since the Ming Dynasty is certainly not an easy task.

I was also interested in recent statistics of shark finning and estimates in the shark fin trade. I found many articles and statistics on the matter, but what I mostly found was a general struggle to track and quantify trading due to the general secrecy of the market. As I read in an article on Science News, "Data on shark harvests have always been poor". What the new trends suggest, Clarke says, is that "if we're going to have any hope of managing shark populations, we're going to need far better data." So in reality, we know the problem is vast, even without numbers; could we be underestimating the numbers?

Resources:

- http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/opinion/sunday/souring-on-shark-fin-soup.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
- <https://www.sciencenews.org/blog/food-thought/new-estimates-shark-fin-trade>